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Peripheral learning of English language: A comparison between ESL and EFL contexts provided for university students

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Abstract

One of the techniques of language learning suggested by Lozanov (1978) is “peripheral learning”. He believes that students can learn a lot of things that they see around them. In the environment of the class, a lot of language materials are presented in the form of posters and students are not assigned to study them. The purpose is to provide students with peripheral learning. According to McGlothlin (1997) who observed his children’s first language development, a child does not use language for its own sake. In reality, he never pays attention to language by any means. For a child, language is considered a means to an end, that is, his joy. Therefore, first language acquisition in early stages is mainly peripheral. In the present study, the contexts (English as a second language versus English as a foreign language) in which both Indian and Iranian university students study and the amount of peripheral learning that they are exposed to in their daily life outside the campus have been compared. In the end, the author has suggested some ways for enriching the environment for the university students who study English as a foreign language.

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1. Introduction

In the late 70s, Georgi Lozanov, a Bulgarian psychologist, argued that students naturally set up psychological barriers to learning - based on fears that they will be unable to perform and have limited ability to learn. Lozanov believed that learners may have used only 5 to 10 percent of their mental capacity, and that the brain could process and retain much more material if given "optimal" conditions for learning. Based on his research in the field of psychology, Lozanov began to develop a language learning method that focused on "desuggestion" of the limitations learners think they have, and providing the sort of relaxed state of mind that would facilitate the retention of material to its maximum potential. In other words, regarding the atmosphere of the class and even the content, Lozanov believes that we teachers should “suggest” whatever students like and “desuggest” whatever

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they dislike. This method is known as "Suggestopedia" - the name reflecting the application of the power of "suggestion" to the field of pedagogy.

The main concern of the present article is one of the key features borrowed from suggestopedia, that is, "peripheral" learning. The word peripheral can be considered synonymous with words like: unimportant, minor, secondary, and marginal. So, peripheral learning can be defined as learning from the environment that students are present in. "Peripheral" learning is encouraged through the presence in the learning environment of posters and decorations featuring the target language and different grammatical information. Students can absorb information "effortlessly" when it is perceived as part of the environment, rather than the material "to be attended to".

If we consider the community that the students live in as the environment that they can learn peripherally and not just the classroom environment, we will see that Indian university students enjoy living in a much richer environment than their Iranian peers. The following sections will describe the present conditions both in India where English is acquired as a second language, and Iran where English is taught as a foreign language, and the related suggestions to solve the problems that will be posed.

2. Peripheral learning in India

One of the main components of language that can be learned and rehearsed peripherally is vocabulary. In some methods of language teaching, grammar has priority over vocabulary (e.g. Audio-Lingual Method) and some consider vocabulary prior to grammar component (freeman, 1986, 2000; Richards and Rodgers, 2001). They emphasize learning vocabulary and say that grammar will just take care of itself (e.g. Natural Approach). Krashen (1987) believes that "while knowledge of vocabulary may not be sufficient for understanding all messages, there is little doubt that an increased vocabulary helps the acquirer understand more of what is heard or read," (p. 80). Our experience in Iran shows that knowing all grammatical rules does not suffice, as high school students in Iran learn some grammatical rules that even native speakers of English language are not aware of them, or at least they do not follow those rules when they speak; nevertheless, they can not use them practically. Therefore, it is better to examine the other way that is, emphasizing on vocabulary while we do not ignore the knowledge of grammatical rules.

Indian students have a large number of vocabularies already there in their mind when they enter university. Comparing to Iranian students, the words that Indian students can recognize and/or produce are much more. What is the reason? Or better to say "What are the reasons?" One of the reasons is that when Iranian students are taught words, it remains in their mind up to the time that they want to use it in the final exam. They no longer need the words. Nowhere the words will be seen or heard. The phenomenon that can be called "short term change". While Indian students are taught some words, they have plenty of opportunities to practice them peripherally. Although there are other reasons for that kind of "long term change" that occur in Indian students' minds, one main reason that cannot be underestimated is practicing the taught words *peripherally*. Indian students have been provided with the following opportunities:

- E Television channels: Cable TV and satellite with more than 10 channels whose medium is English language.
- E Mobiles: Indian students receive a lot of SMSs most of them in English which inform them about their account and new plans and the like which use similar words and terms, a good chance to practice what students already know in other contexts.
- E Internet: High speed internet which is reasonably priced provides students with excellent opportunity to do their projects, reading about their favourite subjects like sport, science etc. They chat using English language while many Iranian students being afraid of not choosing the right word stick to a new version of chatting a mixture of both Persian and English words called "PENGLISH". An alternative that harm both English and Persian languages.

- E Advertisements: The other source of peripheral learning is written English advertisements left in the houses' mailboxes or glued on the walls here, there and everywhere.
- E Products labels: Most of the labels which are attached to the products provide students as consumers with essential information for consumption. While some of them are written in Hindi and English, most of the others are just printed in English. In this way, a lot of suitable words and expressions are reviewed.
- E Traffic signs: Most of the traffic and road signs are printed in English, a good source of practicing vocabulary along with verbs (content words) and the related prepositions (function words) peripherally.
- E Medium of instructions: In different colleges and even some schools (e.g. Carmel Convent school in Chandigarh City, India), the medium of instruction is English. Here English has its peripheral role that is; English is a means to an end not the end itself.
- E Communications/ correspondences: English is widely used for oral communications and correspondences among people and administrations. Lots of newspapers, magazines, and other forms of periodicals which are frequently used by Indians especially young people are issued in English. Again English language plays its secondary role of being a communicative tool as well as being practiced peripherally.

Based on a hypothesis suggested by Krashen and Terrel (1983), students learn a subject when the level of its difficulty is a little beyond the present level of their knowledge (I+1). This may be interpreted differently in the educational contexts of Iran and India. I skimmed the book that students of grade six study as their textbook in Carmel school in India. There were a lot of words which were very difficult and I dare say that I did not know the meaning of some of them. I asked my daughter who had been granted to participate in the same class about the way that Indian students cope with these difficult words. The answer was that although the Indian teacher tries to provide students with some definitions, students mostly get the meaning from the context. Of course, teachers do not emphasize on memorizing all these words, and they focus on the general meaning of the text. Here we see that Indian high school students do some readings in English that even our university students whose field of study is English do not. In the next section, I will discuss the present situation in Iran and the need for change in our insight toward English language. The results of the discussion can be generalized to all contexts where English is considered as a foreign language.

3. Peripheral learning in Iran

Years ago, there was a symposium held in our university. The subject discussed was Esperanto language. One of the experts who were in favor of Esperanto addressed all students of English language and said "we should put English aside because we waste our time learning it. She claimed that while we learn their language, they study other subjects. That is why they are more successful than us." What do you think? Is that really workable? If yes, that is a long way to get an international consensus among all nations to change the language to Esperanto for example. If no, let's look the present condition in Iran.

- E The main problem when a researcher wants to attend an international conference and present his or her findings in or out of the country is English language.
- E The courses of "English for special purposes (ESP)", the courses that we call them "Specialized English" in Iran are mostly taught by lecturers whose major is not English. They have apparently graduated from the same field of study in a country where the medium of instruction has been English. What do they do in the class? They translate a text into Persian language. They may ask the students to study a list of technical words of the related field and memorize their Persian equivalents. That is all.
- E Students of English literature, Translation, and Teaching gradually lose their gained knowledge after graduation specially their mental lexicon (e.g. vocabulary).

4. Conclusions- related suggestions

Regarding the aforementioned problems, there are some suggestions as follows:

- E Instructors who are supposed to teach General English courses and specifically those who hold Specialized English courses whether they have got their degree in or out of the country should get familiar with the techniques of teaching English. In that way, they will go beyond just translating texts into Persian. They will link class subjects to the real world events. Therefore, they will enable students to remove language barriers and satisfy their needs.
- E In order to provide university students with peripheral learning, regardless of their field of study, university professors should participate in designing scientific programs shown on television. Different scientific discussions (e.g. social, economical, political, medical, and agricultural) can be broadcast using Persian medium along with its translation in English in the form of subtitle or vice versa. Movies can be subtitled. In this way, a lot of opportunities will be provided for peripheral learning. Limited work (e.g. Animals Wild Life, Channel 4 which is mainly devoted to scientific subjects in Iran) does not suffice because it has very limited audiences. The subtitles should be the *translation* of the main text, not just word by word equivalents which seem meaningless or vague. This is an academic task that brings universities to the spotlight.
- E There should be a cooperation between municipalities and universities to make the traffic signs, notices, warnings and the like bilingual. At the present time, we can seldom see such informative signs and signals in two languages. Unfortunately, the existing ones suffer a lot of grammatical mistakes and misspellings. In this case, Iranian students are exposed to Non-English which is not facilitative but hindrance to peripheral learning. In addition, Iran is among the first 10 countries which enjoy tourist attractions. Bilingual traffic signs, warnings and informative notices can have more than one purpose if we consider foreigners who visit our country.
- E Online discussions, forums, diaries, journals, specialized periodicals which are supervised by universities and their medium is English are good sources of peripheral learning. Instructors can refer university students to sources like these for doing their projects and issue their project outcomes in one of these forms.

The context in which Indian students live in is totally different from their Iranian peers. In India, English is considered as a second language, but English is a foreign language in Iran, and it is not practically used out of the class. But, there are a lot ways to provide Iranian University students with opportunities through which they can acquire the language or at least practice peripherally the language that they have been taught.

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